

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

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USMISSION EC BRUSSELS

C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 14396

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: HAROLD WILSON

REF: LONDON'S 14384

1. AS BACKGROUND FOR THE SECRETARY'S MEETING WITH HAROLD WILSON (REFTEL), WE OFFER THE FOLLOWING ASSESSMENT OF HIS CURRENT SITUATION AS LEADER OF THE LABOR PARTY:

2. HAROLD WILSON HAS BEEN LEADER OF THE LABOR PARTY SINCE 1963. HE DOES NOT ENJOY THE RESPECT, LOYALTY, OR AFFECTION OF MANY LABOR MPS AND REMAINS LEADER TODAY LARGELY BECAUSE THE VARIOUS FACTIONS WITHIN THE PARTY CANNOT AGREE ON A SUCCESSOR. ANY ATTEMPT TO UNSEAT HIM WOULD PROBABLY RESULT IN A STRUGGLE THAT WOULD TEAR THE PARTY WIDE OPEN.

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3. THE LEFT WING, WHICH HAS GAINED SUBSTANTIALLY IN

STRENGTH AND INFLUENCE DURING THE PAST THREE YEARS, IS BITTER OVER WHAT IT REGARDS AS WILSON'S BETRAYAL OF SOCIALIST POLICIES DURING HIS TENURE AS PRIME MINISTER FROM 1964-70. IT MISTRUSTS WILSON AND IS DETERMINED TO COMMIT HIM AND ANY FUTURE LABOR GOVERNMENT AS FIRMLY AS POSSIBLE TO A RADICAL SOCIALIST PROGRAM EMBRACING MASSIVE EXTENSIONS OF PUBLIC OWNERSHIP.

4. THE RIGHT WING, STILL LOYAL TO THE MEMORY OF HUGH GAITSKELL, HOLDS WILSON IN CONTEMPT FOR HIS CAPITULATION TO MILITANT TRADE UNIONS ON THE ISSUES OF WAGE CONTROLS AND REFORM OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, AND FOR HIS SHIFTING STAND ON BRITISH ENTRY INTO THE COMMON MARKET.

5. WILSON, FOR HIS PART, IS DEFENSIVE ABOUT HIS RECORD AS PRIME MINISTER, SUSPICIOUS OF POTENTIAL RIVALS, AND CHRONICALLY INSECURE. PREOCCUPIED WITH WHAT HE REGARDS AS THE OVERRIDING NECESSITY OF HOLDING THE PARTY TOGETHER, HE SEEKS, ON ISSUE AFTER ISSUE, TO FIND AND OCCUPY THE CENTER OF GRAVITY AND THEN WORK OUT A COMPROMISE POLICY TO PAPER OVER DIFFERENCES. THE BROAD MIDDLE GROUND OF THE PARTY LOOKS IN VAIN FOR STRONG, CONSISTENT, PRINCIPLED LEADERSHIP, AND GROWS INCREASINGLY DEMORALIZED.

6. AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND, IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING THAT THE PARTY HAS FARED POORLY IN RECENT BY-ELECTIONS. DESPITE THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT'S SERIOUS AND PERSISTENT DIFFICULTIES IN MANAGING THE ECONOMY, LABOR HAS FAILED TO CONVINCE THE ELECTORATE THAT IT WOULD DO ANY BETTER. THERE IS WIDESPREAD POPULAR DISENCHANTMENT WITH BOTH MAJOR PARTIES AND AN INCREASING TENDENCY ON THE PART OF VOTERS TO REGISTER THEIR PROTEST BY SUPPORTING THE LIBERALS, SCOTTISH AND WELSH NATIONALISTS, OR OTHER MINOR PARTIES. ON PRESENT READING, LABOR CAN SCARCELY HOPE TO WIN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION EXCEPT BY DEFAULT, I.E., IF THE GOVERNMENT FORFEITS THE CONFIDENCE OF THE VOTERS EVEN FURTHER. IN POINT OF FACT, LATEST ORC
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OPINION POLL, PUBLISHED TODAY, GIVES CONSERVATIVES FIVE PERCENT LEAD OVER LABOR.

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